USING THE INFORMATION OBTAINED FROM RESOLVED CITIZEN COMPLAINTS

EXECUTIVE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Citizen complaints should be reviewed and analyzed for trends that may indicate there are difficulties, training issues, or problem employees. The problem was that once Orange County Fire Rescue Department (OCFRD) considered a citizen complaint resolved the information was not used as part of a quality improvement program.

The purpose of this research project was to determine how the information in the documentation of citizen complaints could become part of a quality improvement program. Evaluative research was used to answer the following questions:

- 1. How should OCFRD categorize citizen complaints?
- 2. Are there any trends in the types of citizen complaints received by OCFRD?
- 3. What beneficial information can be derived from an analysis of OCFRD complaints?

The procedures used to complete this research included a review of the literature, a review of logged citizen complaints, and an analysis of these complaints.

The results of this research indicate that simply resolving citizen complaints is not enough. The valuable information obtained in complaint resolution needs to be used to improve customer service as substantiated by the research of others.

The recommendations of this research project include establishing a data collection program to improve analysis of complaints. Second, training on documentation and complaint resolution should be provided for personnel who are assigned citizen complaints. Third, this information should be published for the entire department to insure compliance with the goal of good customer service.

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INTRODUCTION

Most fire chiefs regard a citizen complaint as a "pain in the neck." (Coleman, 1990). However, they can provide valuable feedback as to the approval-level of citizens regarding the service provided by the fire department (McClendon, 1997). Almost all fire departments take complaints very seriously. A complaint against a department indicates that the service provided did not meet the expectation of the citizen receiving the service (Mallory, Gooch, Griffin, 1998). OCFRD has a comprehensive Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for responding to citizen complaints. The problem is that once a citizen complaint is considered resolved, the information gathered has not been used as part of a quality improvement program.

A considerable amount of effort goes into resolving a citizen complaint by OCFRD supervisors. This effort generally resolves a citizen complaint but the benefit from this collection of data is not maximized. The purpose of this research is to determine how the information in the documentation of citizen complaints can become part of a quality improvement program.

An evaluative research methodology will be used to answer the following research questions:

- 1. How should OCFRD categorize citizen complaints?
- 2. Are there any current trends in the types of citizen complaints received by OCFRD?
- 3. What beneficial information can be derived from an analysis of OCFRD complaints?

The resolved citizen complaints on file will be used as a database for this research.

General types of consumer and citizen complaints, as well as procedures for handling these complaints will be identified in the Literature Review. These results will be used to make a

recommendation on how the OCFRD may benefit from the information obtained from resolved citizen complaints.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

OCFRD was formed in October of 1981 by combining sixteen separate fire control districts. The department provides Fire and Emergency Medical Service (EMS) to all of unincorporated Orange County, Florida. There are 32 operational stations with 2 more are under construction. Each shift has 34 engine companies, 24 Advance Life Support (ALS) rescues, 5 truck companies, a hazardous materials squad, an air and light truck, and an ALS transport helicopter. One-half of the 24 ALS rescues transport all patients to the hospital. The other half responds with private ambulances, which in turn transport patients to the hospital. If an OCFRD rescue transports a patient to the hospital, the patient is billed for the service. If a patient is transported by private ambulance, the patient is billed by the ambulance company and not by OCFRD.

Orange County Administrative Regulations (OCAR) state in Chapter 5.01, Section I, paragraph B, "Employees shall treat all citizens with a professional attitude, demonstrating their aim to serve the citizen's needs." In paragraph C, it states, "Citizens' complaints will be handled promptly and courteously."

In keeping with the OCAR, OCFRD has a Divisional SOP for Processing Citizen Contacts. The SOP is very comprehensive. In OCFRD's Divisional SOP, Section A/5.3. Paragraph 1.0 Purpose states:

To establish guidelines for the receipt and investigation of complaints and/or allegations against Orange County Fire Rescue Division by a member of the public. This procedure shall ensure the integrity of the Division by establishing a

process that provides thorough investigations of any matter that might effect the efficient or professional operation of the Division, and shall ensure the protection of all employees through conscientious investigation and ultimate resolution of each allegation and/or complaint.

To comply with the OCAR and the Divisional SOP, OCFRD supervisors exert a large amount of effort in resolving citizen complaints. The documentation may include a statement from the complainant, statements from the involved employees; various alarm reports, and a synopsis of the actions necessary to resolve the complaint. At the completion of this process, the report is filed with the Chief's office. A system needs to be in place to extrapolate data from these complaints to determine if changes are necessary to prevent future complaints of the same nature.

This research relates to the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer course, Executive Development, in several ways. During the presentation of the course, the booklet "Criteria for Performance Excellence" about the "Malcolm Baldridge National Quality Award for 2000", was provided for the students. The booklet on page 15 discusses customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction determination.

In addition, the National Fire Academy's Executive Development student manual (2001) emphasizes the necessity of determining ways to improve service provided. On page SM 10-2 it states, "Given a conceptual understanding of Total Quality Management (TQM) and service quality principles, the students will be able to evaluate services provided by their organizations and develop strategies to improve organizational quality and service standards."

LITERATURE REVIEW

Why do we need to evaluate resolved citizen complaints?

Authors for the public and private sectors state that complaints are essential feedback for successful customer service (Johnson, 1998; McClendon, 1997; Roush, 1999).

McClendon (1997) stressed that complaints indicate unsuccessful service and provide essential feedback. He also felt when customers complain, they want to continue working with you, they haven't given up on your service, and they want to give you a chance to fix it. He also states complaints can be the easiest, least costly, and most efficient ways to obtain information about our customers.

Johnson (1998), writing for law enforcement, contends the number and type of complaints clearly indicate the existence of problems. Complaints can indicate the need for improved training; uncover problem employees or potential sources of legal liability. By taking corrective action to eliminate complaints of similar nature, the quality of service will improve.

Roush (1999) in his book on customer service in the Home Depot Corporation, relayed that you are not going to please everyone. Marcus and Blank, the founders of the highly successful corporation, knew they needed to address customer complaints. They also wanted feedback on what they were doing right and wrong (pg. 89).

Larry Mercer, Executive Vice President of Home Depot, stated to employees, "Instead of being embarrassed [that] your store received a complaint, you should be proud that your customers have confidence in your ability to fix anything. You should take the opportunity they have given you and rise to the occasion." (Roush, 1999, pg. 91)

Albrecht (1988) states, "Letters of complaint and praise can provide important clues to what employees are doing well and what they need to do better" (pg. 220).

How should citizen complaints be categorized?

Coleman (1990) identified two types of citizen complaints. These were complaints about fire hazards and complaints about the department's performance.

Schroeder, Lombardo, and Strollo (2000), in their writing on law enforcement, classify complaints as either employee performance-related or as a result of departmental policies, rules or judicial decisions. Many times, citizens are unfamiliar with the laws that govern our actions. As a result, citizens misunderstand our course of action in dealing with a particular situation (pg. 291).

Doering (1998) reports the results of a survey of customer service for ambulance service, which is part of a larger fire department-based system. In his writings, he summarizes negative customer feedback in six categories. These include the perceived lack of courtesy and politeness, a poor rating of ambulance response times, and the quality of medical care provided. Also relevant was the ability of the crew to explain what was happening to the patient, their ability to reduce patient anxiety, and their ability to satisfy the patient's non-medical needs.

Unfortunately, one category of complaint is from the chronic complainer (Ramsey, 1998). These types of customers do not want to be satisfied. They enjoy complaining. They cannot or will not let you satisfy them. Chronic complainers should receive reasonable attention, honest answers, and a good faith effort to resolve their complaint; however, helping a chronic complainer should not become your life's work.

Harari (1999) points out some customers will never be satisfied and are abusive toward your personnel. He also describes statements from Chip R. Bell, an authority on customer service. Bell points out there are customers from hell and customers who have been through

hell. Malicious complaints are rare and the wise supervisor should always assume a complaint is valid.

What trends can be expected from a review of citizen complaints?

Coleman (1990) contends that when complaints are tracked as part of an information management system, trends may be measured, such as changes in the values of the community, fire code changes, or growing dissatisfaction with fire department performance. It is not important how many complaints are received but, rather, how the information about the complaints is used.

In an article on airline service in USA Today, Ramon A. Avila (1999), Professor of Marketing at Ball State University (Muncie, Indiana) Professional Selling Institute, expresses concerns over trends in customer service. He states America is witnessing the death of customer service. Customers should expect rude employees and as little service as possible. Protection of the bottom line is more important than a disappointed customer.

Harari (1999) reports smart leaders use complaints as fuel to strengthen operations and improve product and service quality. They use them as part of their training and development. They scrutinize them about what customers might expect in the future. They use complaints to stay connected to the customer. Most companies treat complaints as an irritant, which are then poorly resolved in a bureaucratic manner. Rarely, do companies regard complaints as golden opportunities for valuable feedback.

Johnson (1998) in his writings about complaints against law enforcement found that complaint reports were very detailed. The documentation determined trends about complaints as to the age, race, sex, and level of education in which officers received the most complaints. His report, a compilation of numerous studies, stated 50% of complaints involved rude or

inappropriate statements. It also appears the complainants had more concern about the tone in which they were spoken to than the content of what was said to them.

Does good customer service mean encouraging complaints?

Avila (1999) relates in one survey that an angry customer will tell 72 people about a negative experience and a truly happy customer will tell 12 people. Six customers must encounter outstanding service just to break even with one customer with a bad experience.

Smith (1997) concludes all employees must value each contact with a customer. Most customers only have a few contacts with the fire department, so each one will be remembered. If this contact is bad, customers will tell this experience to their friends and neighbors, and their friends and neighbors will repeat the experience to their friends and neighbors.

McClendon (1997) states as a good rule of thumb, only 4 percent of the people who are disappointed with service will complain. With that, one could assume that 96 percent of customers who received poor service did not complain. While these figures are approximations, complaints about poor service from the public sector field even fewer complaints than the private sector.

Additionally, McClendon (1997) relays many citizens do not complain about poor government service because they feel it is a waste of time. Others know "you can't fight city hall." To the surprise of many public servants, the number one reason people don't complain is fear of reprisal. McClendon cites a 1995 CNN/USA Today pole found that "39 percent believe that government has become so large and powerful that it poses an immediate threat to the rights and freedoms of ordinary citizens" (pg. 22).

McClendon (1997) asserts complaints should be valued and not feared. A complaintfriendly environment encourages complaints. This environment should include complaint boxes, customer service evaluation forms, and nametags on employees. The phone numbers to supervisory personnel should be easily accessed. The supervisors should be trained to invite complaints and not be interested in grilling or discrediting the complainer.

Concurring with McClendon, Harari (1999) writes, a customer with a complaint is stating that I represent others. If I am unhappy, others are too. You should thank me for my complaint. There are problems with your system and something bad is happening. So what ever you are doing wrong, needs to be changed quickly.

Paulson (1991) describes the information in the book, *I'm First: Your Customer's*Message to You by Linda Silverman Goldstein. She writes that taxpayer discontent has led to a number of adverse outcomes to governmental agencies. These include revenue limiting initiatives, failed bond issues, and complaints to the city council and city manager's office.

Additional concerns include bitter objections to higher salaries for public employees and many services previously performed by public employees including fire protection contracted to private agencies.

PROCEDURES

Evaluative research was conducted, which included a literature review of principles of dealing with complaints by citizens and consumers. Literature sources from both the public and private sectors were included. The public sector provided information from authors in the fire service, law enforcement, and local government. Private sector authors dealt with complaints in retail, airline service, restaurant service, and general business.

Every citizen complaint logged with the fire chief's office of OCFRD for 1999, 2000, and for the first six months of 2001 was reviewed. Each complaint was reviewed to determine the cause of the complaint, the date it occurred, and which bureau or shift of the department was

implicated. The complaints were broken down into two categories; complaints not related to employee performance and complaints related to employee performance.

The category not related to employee performance identified issues related to policy, political agenda, laws governing fire department activity, and items outside of the general control of the fire department personnel. Subcategories were developed based on their frequency of occurrence. The subcategories developed included business inspections, legal burning, and billing for automatic fire alarms (AFA) and EMS transport. Also included were complaints about other agencies, situations whereby OCFRD was misidentified, and issues involving policy or political agendas. An other category was included for situations that were difficult to define. Table 1 provides the information developed in this category.

Complaints related to employee performance involved situations in which personnel within the fire department had direct control over the means to correct the problem. Again, subcategories were developed based on their frequency of occurrence. The primary subcategories included complaints about (a) discourteous, rude, or poor attitude, (b) missing personal property, (c) how a call was handled, (d) damage to personal property, (e) medical care, (f) response time, and (g) emergency and non-emergency driving. Several additional subcategories were also included on Table 2.

The complaints for each subcategory were tallied by year (1999, 2000, and the first half of 2001), and then totaled. The totals for the 30-month period were used to develop an overall analysis. This information is presented on Tables 1 and 2.

An analysis of the frequency of different complaints was referenced with the alarm load of each station, the occurrence of citizen complaints linked to each station, and the occurrence of

complaints referring to personnel being discourteous, rude or displaying a poor attitude. This is presented on Table 3.

Table 4 was developed illustrating complaints and alarm load by Battalion in OCFRD.

Complaints about discourteous behavior as well as complaints relating to performance are included on this table.

Assumptions and Limitations

The files for 1998 and earlier have been archived in a warehouse. During the time of this research, the files were being moved to another facility. The files are being recataloged and reorganized, and as a result, made them unavailable for review.

Information on alarm load was obtained from the Planning and Research Office of OCFRD. In 1999, alarms were reported by units that responded and not by station. The system changed in the year 2000 and now alarms are reported by units that responded and by station. In addition, Orange County's population is transitory due to tourism and migration to the south in the winter making a full year reporting period necessary. To accommodate this and since only the first half of the year 2001 has been reported, the alarm load by station was derived for alarms occurring in the year 2000. For the purpose of this report, an alarm is defined as any response of OCFRD, including automatic fire alarms.

RESULTS

1. How should OCFRD categorize citizen complaints?

The review of citizen complaints found 79 complaints filed in 1999, 81 filed in 2000, and 51 filed in the first half of 2001. A total of 210 complaints in the 30-month period were reviewed. As stated in the Introduction, once the complaint was considered resolved, it was placed in a file and not used for quality improvement. By using the information obtained in the

Literature Review, the complaints were broken down into two categories. These categories were titled Complaints Not Related to Performance (Table 1) and Complaints Related to Employee Performance (Table 2). Subcategories of complaints were developed based on their frequency as indicated on Tables 1 and 2, and provide the causes of most complaints.

2. Are there any current trends in the types of citizen complaints received by OCFRD?

In the category referring to Complaints Not Related to Employee Performance, the totals for the 30-month period of research is compiled on Table 1. The subcategory referring to complaints about policy or political issues comprised 21.9% of the total for the research period. An *other* category was comprised of complaints that were either difficult to define or categorize, and was the next highest at 20.3%. A notable problem is that OCFRD was misidentified 10 times within the research period as being another department or agency. There were also situations whereby the citizen was seeking assistance in resolving complaints with other agencies. Either the complainant did not know how to go about contacting the other agency or was not making progress in resolving the complaint.

In the category, Complaints Related to Employee Performance, the subcategory relating to discourteous, rude or a poor attitude of personnel stood out. These types of complaints occurred 28.2% in this category for the research period. The next two subcategories of complaints were about missing personal property (10.7%) and concerns about medical care (10.1%). All complaints about missing personal property involved calls whereby the patient on an EMS call was transported to the hospital. Most of these involved personal items such as watches, rings, or wallets. The next two subcategories involved damage to personal property (8.7%) and how an alarm was handled (8.7%). The next highest incidence of complaint involved

response time (6.7%). The last complaint subcategory, over 5%, was emergency driving by OCFRD personnel. Other types of complaints and their ranking are listed on Table 2.

The complaints about responders being discourteous, rude or displaying a poor attitude stood out as the largest subcategory. This should cause the greatest concern for OCFRD's credibility. As a result, further analysis was completed. Table 3 illustrates the activity of each station by alarm load for the year 2000. Complaints about performance are listed with the subcategory about discourteous behavior for the research period. On Table 4, the alarm load for the 2000 is listed by battalion with the subsequent complaints about performance and courtesy for each battalion.

The variety of complaints about medical care did not present any type of trend. The range of complaints in this area was very broad.

The subcategory about damage to personal property involved situations whereby OCFRD inadvertently damaged property and the complainant was requesting reimbursement. Many times, this is simply the cost of doing business. An observed total of 13 events of this type are considered insignificant (author's experience).

Complaints about *How an alarm was handled* generally involved disagreements between the caller and OCFRD's personnel as to how the incident was resolved; and as a result, a complaint was made by a dissatisfied citizen.

Table 2, displaying complaints related to performance, shows the other types of complaints, their frequency, and the percentage of occurrence for the research period.

3. What beneficial information can be derived from an analysis of OCFRD citizen complaints?

As indicated on Table 2, the courtesy and demeanor of OCFRD's personnel should be addressed. It stands out as a possible problem for the entire department. Table 4 shows Battalion Six having the most calls for service and the most complaints. In this battalion, all of the rescue trucks transport emergency patients to the hospital, increasing their contact with the public. This may subsequently explain why this battalion had the most complaints about courtesy and attitude. The number of complaints, however, appears to be disproportionate to the increased level of alarm load.

As Tables 1 and 2 illustrate, most subcategories have complaints of similar nature occur every year. It would appear that efforts made to reduce complaints in one subcategory are successful while efforts in another subcategory are unsuccessful. For example, there were not any complaints about response time, emergency driving, or units not using the station traffic light in the first half of the year 2001. However, complaints about non-emergency driving, missing personal property, and complaints about the station public address system (PA) stayed about the same.

Another example of the benefits of complaint analysis is the observation that all of the complaints about the station PA occurred at the same station, which was just built in the last year. OCFRD has two other stations under construction and this could become an issue again.

Johnson (1998) states that by eliminating complaints of similar nature, the quality of service will improve.

DISCUSSION

Results of analyzing and categorizing citizen complaints support the goal of customer service for Orange County and OCFRD. Feedback from complaints and how it is used supports successful customer service (Johnson, 1998; McClendon, 1997; Roush, 1999).

The citizens of Orange County who come forward with a complaint are supporting the fire department. They are saying OCFRD has a problem and we have faith in you to fix it (McClendon, 1997). If a problem is resolved, it can also reduce the liability of the county (Johnson, 1998) and this may affect the government's cost of doing business, and therefore, its citizen's taxes to support this activity.

When a complaint is properly resolved, hopefully OCFRD has now shown that the feedback regarding service the complainant provided was appreciated. As Smith (1997) stated, most citizens have only a few contacts with the fire department, so each one is remembered. Negative experiences generally spread six times faster than positive ones (Avila, 1999).

Complaints about performance create great opportunities for customer service improvement. Most of the time, these involve direct contact problems that can be improved upon quickly and easily. Employees want to do a good job. They also need to know what they are doing is right or wrong. Employees need to be trained to understand that complaints afford them an opportunity to improve the quality of the service these employees provide (Roush, 1999).

By creating subcategories based on frequency of occurrence, trends can be developed (Coleman, 1990). Trends about a particular employee's performance, policy issues, or the overall mindset presented by the department's supervision. These trends can even include a chronic complainer who cannot be satisfied (Harari, 1999).

OCFRD must evaluate complaints beyond simple resolution. The information is too valuable to be wasted. When one considers OCFRD responded to over 180,000 alarms in the 30-month study period and only logged 210 complaints, the level of customer service sounds

pretty impressive. However, if you apply the general rule of only about 1 in 25 complain, 210 becomes 5250 which provides an area of concern (McClendon, 1997).

RECOMMENDATIONS

The research shows a considerable effort is exerted to resolve citizen complaints. This effort illustrates to the complainant that OCFRD takes citizen complaints seriously. This needs to continue with some changes to improve upon the benefit derived from this data.

OCFRD should develop a data collection program to improve on the analysis of the information obtained in resolving complaints. The data in this program should include the date and time of the activity generating the complaint, the shift or bureau involved, the name of the complainant, the units involved, and the names of the employees implicated. Additional information necessary should include the type of complaint, the type of the original call, and the incident number. Each citizen complaint should be assigned a tracking number to be included on all documentation. A computerized system needs to be in place to search for multiple occurrences of the same information within the program. This should include names of personnel, units involved, and the name of the complainant. This would provide the access necessary to search for trends and/or personnel with multiple complaints.

Additional training is recommended for personnel assigned to resolve complaints. This training would include instruction on the benefits of complaints, the proper collection of information relating to complaints, and the approach necessary to resolve complaints professionally. Supervisors also need to know how to categorize complaints to insure that trends can be identified. The training should also include methods to access the computer program to review or add to the computerized data.

A small committee should review complaints quarterly to search for trends and the means to improve service in Orange County. When trends or problems are identified, recommendations for change would be initiated. The recommendations may include changes in procedures, policies, or ordinances if necessary.

Finally, a semi-annual report should be provided to the entire department to insure personnel are aware of the types of complaints OCFRD receives. Personnel are generally only aware of complaints about themselves or their service. A published report would provide direction for the entire department on possibly changing activities that generate complaints.

Any quality improvement program must address the issue of complaints. Complaints will always be generated for one reason or another. How complaints are viewed and resolved can truly make the difference in the level of customer service provided by OCFRD or any fire department. If OCFRD is to continue growing and meeting the service needs of its citizens, customer service must be a primary goal.

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APPENDIX

TABLE 1

Complaints Not Related to Employee Performance

	1999	2000	*2001	Total	%
Political or policy issues	8	3	3	14	21.9%
Other	5	4	4	13	20.3%
About other agencies	5	3	3	11	17.2%
Burning (legal)	8	3	0	11	17.2%
Where OCFRD was misidentified	2	4	3	9	14.1%
EMS transport bill	2	1	0	3	4.7%
Business Inspections	1	1	0	2	3.1%
Bill for Automatic Fire Alarm Response	1	0	0	1	1.6%
Total	32	19	13	64	

^{% =} Percentage of total for this table.

Other = complaints which were difficult to define or categorize.

^{*}Complaints for January through June 2001.

TABLE 2
Complaints Related to Employee Performance

	1999	2000	*2001	Total	%
Discourteous, rude or poor attitude	16	13	13	42	28.2%
Missing personal property	2	7	7	16	10.7%
Medical care	7	6	2	15	10.1%
Damage to personal property	3	6	4	13	8.7%
How an alarm was handled	6	4	3	13	8.7%
Response time	3	7	0	10	6.7%
Driving - Emergency	7	2	0	9	6.0%
Driving - Non-emergency	1	4	4	9	6.0%
Debris left from fire or EMS call	0	4	0	4	2.7%
Station PA is too loud	0	1	3	4	2.7%
Off duty employee activity	2	2	0	4	2.7%
Units not using station traffic light	2	1	0	3	2.0%
Knowledge of response area	1	2	0	3	2.0%
Improper release of patient information	0	0	2	2	1.3%
Rusty tap water from hydrant testing	1	0	0	1	0.7%
Units left before arrival of AFA responder	0	1	0	1	0.7%
Total	51	60	38	149	

^{% =} Percentage for totals on this table.

^{*}Complaints for January through June 2001.

TABLE 3

Complaints in Reference to Alarm Load

Station	Alarm Load 2000	Total Complaints by Performance	Discourteous Behavior
30	5146	2	1
42	4865	9	1
51	4408	2	0
50	4381	2	2
41	3982	10	0
81	3569	4	3
63	3027	6	4
83	3008	5	2
58	2737	5	0
66	2678	14	3
54	2639	3	2
7 1	2636	4	3
53	2485	5	1
40	2451	4	2
52	2422	5	3
36	2082	4	1
72	2075	5	4
28	1995	2	0

TABLE 3 (Continued)

Station	Alarm Load 2000	Total Complaints by Performance	Discourteous Behavior
31	1971	3	1
70	1839	2	1
80	1830	4	0
65	1739	1	0
73	1422	2	0
20	1312	2	1
82	1228	3	2
27	1151	4	3
37	614	0	0
76	602	1	0
29	573	3	0
84	533	2	0
34	507	2	1
64	177	1	1

TABLE 4
Complaints by Battalion

Battalion	Alarm Load 2000	Complaints About Performance	Complaints Discourteous Behavior
4	16,506	35	8
5	17,212	24	8
6	20,248	43	15
7	18,118	19	9
Total	72,084	121	40